

# History UNFOLDING

## “ROBBER BARONS” OR “CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY”?



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*"Robber Barons" or "Captains of Industry"?*

# Introduction

## Competing Images of the Entrepreneur

Mark Twain labeled America's post-Civil War era "the Gilded Age." It was a perfect description of a time when a new, enormously rich business class engaged in garish displays of wealth, colossal swindles and tawdry political manipulation. Meanwhile, burgeoning cities filling up with immigrants produced massive slums and social disorders of a new and disturbing kind. It's no wonder the emerging industrial leaders of the time were often castigated as a new class of "Robber Barons." They were powerful, often ruthless men whose wealth was seen as based on exploitation and whose social status was seen as utterly undeserved.

Yet the same era also generated a completely different way of looking at all this. In this other view, a new generation of inventors and entrepreneurs was ushering in an industrial golden age. The wealth of these men was enormous, but so too was their positive impact on the economy. Amazing new modes of transportation and communication held hope of linking every city and village into a more unified and orderly society. Meanwhile, huge industrial enterprises would make the nation strong and give work to its growing millions. It's little wonder that to some, therefore, the Robber Barons were heroic "Captains of Industry."

Which of these images was correct is not at issue here. The purpose of this booklet is simply to give you materials you can use to explore fully this important theme in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American life. The illustrations in the booklet are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **The Triumph of Technology**

Illustrations stressing the heroic status of the inventor entrepreneur, with a look at Thomas Edison, the invention of the telephone, the automobile, the assembly line and the triumph of the Wright brothers.

### **The Rich and Famous and the Teeming Masses**

Wealth and the ostentatious display of wealth coexisted with child labor, slums and abject poverty. The stories of Horatio Alger exemplify the way in which many Americans held onto hope about how these huge social problems might be resolved.

### **Captains of an Industrial Giant? . . .**

The illustrations here focus on such figures as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford, and they emphasize the positive view of these men held at the time by millions of Americans.

### **. . . Or Predatory Robber Barons?**

Millions of other Americans resented these "malefactors of great wealth," as Theodore Roosevelt once called them. The editorial cartoons here explore three different aspects of the Robber Baron image so often applied to the industrial giants of the age.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

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## OBJECTIVES

1. Students will better understand how certain key inventions helped transform American industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
  2. Students will understand why the inventor-entrepreneur came to be seen as a kind of hero in those years.
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# The Triumph of Technology

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*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Illustration 1

After the Civil War, an America still made up largely of small rural villages began to experience sweeping changes. In hundreds of ways, new inventions and business practices began to tie these rural communities together into a much more organized national society. One of the most powerful inventions helping to do that was the telephone, invented by Alexander Graham Bell. The allegorical illustration here helps capture the wonder of the invention and the sense people had that it was transforming their lives. Thomas Edison, shown in his laboratory, made some major contributions to the development of the telephone, along with many other enormously important inventions of his own. As a result, inventors like Edison and Bell soon began to be seen as the heroes of a new age.

### Illustration 2

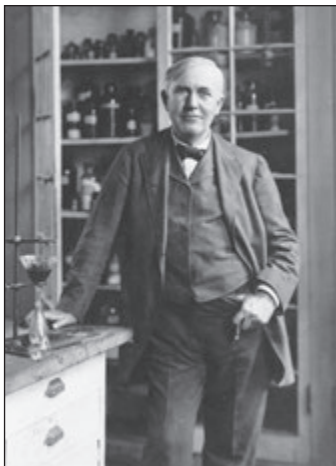
Communication breakthroughs were only part of the story of this time of technological change. In a nation as big as ours, transportation had always been a central concern. By the mid-1800s, railroads were already spreading across the land. But railroad building really came of age in the post-Civil War period. The turn of the century brought a new revolution in transportation—the automobile. Accompanying it were other related triumphs of business and technology, Henry Ford's auto assembly line production methods, for instance, or the Brooklyn Bridge and the thousands of other roads, bridges and other structures that tied the sprawling nation together through an intricate transportation network.

### Illustration 3

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, inventors became the mythic heroes of the age. It was they, above all others, who were bringing a new and brighter future into existence. That was certainly the way Orville and Wilbur Wright were seen. The main photo of them here also suggests something else about inventors that captured people's imagination. It was still a time when a single individual—or two brothers—could change the world on their own. Many of the great business leaders of the day appeared to be self-made masters of industry. Enough, at least, so that this theme became one of the key ideas shaping the debate Americans had in those decades about these giants of industrial life.

## Lesson 1—The Triumph of Technology

# Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustrations**

1. The last quarter of the 19th century has often been called the “age of invention.” One reason for that has to do with the man in the upper left here. Can you name him?
2. Thomas Edison invented many enormously important devices. Can you name some of them?
3. The large illustration here has to do with another key invention of those times, the telephone. Who invented the telephone?
4. The illustration stresses the importance of the telephone in changing life in America. What big changes in American life are portrayed here? How is the telephone seen as contributing to those changes?
5. Inventors like Edison and Bell came to be seen as great heroes in the late 1800s and early 1900s. How does the larger illustration here help to explain why this was so?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. Thomas Edison famously summed up his working methods when he said, “Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.” Read a biography of Thomas Edison. As you read, take note of as many important inventions of his as you can. Then, write a report on his inventions. Explain how those inventions helped change society and, in particular, the different ways they helped unify the nation.
2. **Small-group activity:** Read more about the history of the telegraph, the telephone and the computer. Today we tend to think that computers are altering our sense of connection to the larger world as never before. But some would say the telegraph and the telephone had just as great an impact, if not more, in this way. As a group, research each of these three inventions and debate amongst yourselves which of them really had the biggest impact. Then give a report to the class on your views, and guide the class in a debate on this topic.